

O'Rourke



Ó Ruairc

## HOME OF THE O'ROURKE CLAN

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## Clan History

The O'Rourke family surname is thought to be one of the oldest in the world, originating in the 10th Century following the death of a young prince named Ruarc. The name Ruarc was a name originating with the Old Norse Hrothekr, meaning 'famous king' and the prefix 'O' signifying 'grandson of'. It is believed that Ruarc's mother would have been a Norse woman as for 6 centuries after the name first appeared there are Norse names among the O'Ruairc clan such as Lochlann, Sitric and Amhlaibh. O'Rourke is the anglicized form derived from Ruairc.

### The Early O'Rourkes:

The O'Rourke's were of the same family as the O'Connors of Connacht both claiming descent from Brion, a fifth century King of Connacht who was associated with Ui Neill High Kings of Ireland. The Ui Briuin clan became divided into 3 major groups in the early 11th century. The first group was the family of Ua Conchobair (O'Connor) whose power lay in central Connacht. The O'Ruairc clan who became kings of Breifne and the third being Ua Flaithbertaig (O'Flaherty). The O'Ruairc stronghold of Breifne was comprised of what are today known as counties Cavan and West Leitrim. However at their most powerful their territory extended from Kells in Co Meath to the northern tip of Sligo.

### The first O'Ruairc king of Connacht:

The O'Ruaircs were widely thought to be one of the great significant families of Ireland. They were lords of Breifne and dominated the counties of Cavan and Leitrim and at the same time provided 4 kings of Connacht. The first of these was the great Sean Ferghal O'Ruairc.

Ferghal O'Ruairc was the first to use the name as part of a hereditary surname and the first of any king in the country to be called O'Ruairc. He was born in Ireland at the start of the 10th century and became king of Connacht one of the strongest tribal chiefs in western Ireland and also a prominent leader in the whole of the country. Ferghal O'Ruairc battled far outside his stronghold in Breifne. Around the time 952 – 954 he waged war on the territories of Cairbre and Teathbha which are south of Breifne. In 957 he led a raid on the North of Ireland and was victorious against the Cenel Eoghain of the northern Ui Neill clan. In 960 he was raiding the men of north Munster.

Ferghal's battles made the O'Ruaircs the powerful family they would be known as. He had two sons Aedh and Art who were both noted as Kings of Breifne. At the time of his death he is thought to have been an elderly man, being referred to as Sean Ferghal (old Ferghal). A poet wrote of Ferghal:

"Since Hector was slain by the Greeks,  
or since Achilles was slain at pleasant Troy,  
there has not been killed – it is no lie –  
a splendid warrior like the royal, noble  
grandson of Ruarc"

Although both of Ferghal's sons went on to be Kings of the smaller area of Breifne neither went on to rule the more prominent province of Connacht. This title did however fall to 3 more O'Ruaircs over the following 150 years:

Art Uallach O'Ruairc (1030-1046), son of Aedh and grandson of Ferghal

Aed O'Ruairc (1067 – 1087), Son of Art Uallach

Domnall O'Ruairc (1095 – 1102), Son of Tiernan son of Ualgarg.

### Tiernan O'Ruairc and the Norman Invasion:

In the O'Ruairc lineage there were 19 chiefs, each of them with the name Tiernan, the most famous being Tighearnan Mor Ua Ruairc. Tiernan was the 19th King in the O'Ruairc dynasty and held his power in the 12th century. The Annals of the 4 Masters indicate he ruled Breifne as early as 1124.

In 1152 Tiernan's wife Dervogilla was abducted – although many believed she left of her own free will – along with all of her material wealth and livestock by Dermot MacMurrough, king of Leinster. The "abduction" lasted 2 years before Dervogilla was returned to Tiernan. It was Tiernan's desire for revenge that 14

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years later caused MacMurroughs expulsion from Leinster. At this time MacMurrough fled to England where he sought help from Henry II. Henry sent Richard de Clare, otherwise known as Strongbow, and a small army of Norman Knights to help Dermot in his plight. In 1170 O Ruairc had many of his territories plundered by MacMurrough and Strongbow. In 1172 he was killed by Hugo de Lacy. The Annals of the four masters state that he 'was a man of great power for a very long time'.

Of course the arrival of Strongbow and his Norman army led to the start of the Norman invasion, which ultimately changed the course of Irish history.

Dervogilla went on to live until 1193, outliving the 2 men that had battled over her. She gave generously in her later years to the Cistercian Order and was responsible for the building of the Nun's Church at Clonmacnoise Abbey.

### The 13th Century:

After the death of arguably the most powerful Breifne King, the O Ruairc clan entered an unstable era. With the arrival of the Normans and the English many of the old kingdoms in Ireland were demolished and new alliances formed. Many families formed alliances with the king of England and many lands and kingdoms went to the service of the King.

Unlike the lords of the previous centuries the young clansmen now spent more time fighting each other for kingship of the kingdom than ruling the kingdom. Over the next 100 years there was no long-standing O Ruairc ruler instead the lords changed in quick succession. Aedh son of Gilla served for a short period of time leading up to 1176. Aedh, grandson of Tiernan served until his death in 1187. The title of ruler went a number of times to Ualgarg up until his death in 1231. For a period of 40 years after this there were no less than 11 rulers.

In the early part of the 13th century there started a rivalry within the O Ruairc clan. Niall, grandson of Domnall, last O Ruairc king of Connacht, took the leadership of Northern Co Leitrim. There began a great rivalry between Niall and his descendants and those that belonged to the main clan who were still ruling Breifne with one regularly attacking the other. From this period forward the O Reilly clan started to stake their claim also to the kingdom of Breifne, which led to the territory being divided into Breifne O Rourke and Breifne O Reilly with the O Rourke stronghold being limited to the area which makes up today's Co Leitrim.

### The Clan decline:

The man thought to be the last Gaelic chieftain of the O Rourke clan was Sir Brian O Rourke. Sir Brian and many members of the O Rourke family were thought to have helped large numbers of the survivors of the Spanish Armada when they accidentally landed off the coast of Co Leitrim. Sir Brian was charged with treason for this act, which led to his death in London in 1591.

After the invasion of Cromwell in 1649, their power and influence along with that of many of the remaining Irish clans went into steady decline, which caused many of their leaders and to leave Ireland for mainland Europe.

